

TO SAVE TIME: how the Nepalese Women's Development Programme has reduced rural women's labour input in everyday tasks

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Women's Heavy Workload

Rural women are the backbone of Nepal's subsistence economy. Like most Third World women they start work early in the morning and continue until late in the evening with hardly a break. Their endless daily toil has always been taken for granted. Yet until recently development programmes have largely neglected rural women. A survey in the late 1970s established that on average Nepalese rural women work 10.81 hours a day compared to men's 7.51 hours. (Tables 1a, b & c refer). Their most important role is in the domestic domain as wives and mothers, but they also contribute greatly to directly productive activities. Any development programme that involves additional work for women must, therefore, begin by introducing domestic labour-saving technologies. Moreover, it must also introduce improved technologies for their directly productive activities.

The 'Production Credit for Rural Women' programme (PCRW), discussed in the first number of this Journal, has over the last six years tried to release women from time-consuming daily chores and encouraged them to work in income-generating group ventures, thereby raising their consciousness. Nepal is a country of many diverse areas and different ethnic groups. Every project that aims to improve rural women's productive capacity, therefore, has to be adapted to local conditions. This paper outlines some Nepalese examples of such projects.

Water Collection: Local Water Taps

UNICEF's Rural Water Supply Programme in Nepal indicates how important it is to relieve women of the heavy work involved in fetching water. Almost all the water needed in the household is collected by women and girls. This often takes as much as four hours a day, particularly in the hills. To reduce the burden of this heavy domestic chore UNICEF has established new water supplies in many Nepalese villages. UNICEF supplied the necessary materials and trained local technicians and overseers, who are supervised by UNICEF staff. Wherever such water supplies have been established water users committees are set up, of which at least two members must be women. The user committee must also include local leaders, key people in the community and local householders where the tap or tubewell will be situated.

UNICEF has made a great effort to increase women's participation by including a certain percentage of women among their trained technicians and employing them to coordinate water supply and sanitation programmes at village level. The PRCW field staff assist in this as they know some of the local women whose involvement they promote. Still, men dominate the village water meetings; they tend to monopolise all the responsible jobs and leave the menial cleaning of the communal tap/tubewell to women with the excuse that "women are good at cleaning".

The UNICEF water supply programme always trains local persons to be the caretakers and gives each a box of tools to do the job. It has been found that unless the local people are included in every step of the planning and construction, subsequent maintenance will be neglected. However, even with all these laudable UNICEF measures, the urgent need of a follow up programme has already become apparent: the condition of many water taps or tubewells has deteriorated rapidly through lack of involvement and understanding by the villagers. Local field staff, such as the Women Development Officers (WDOs), can ideally complement these major programmes with on-the-spot checks and giving instructions on the benefits of clean water supply, thereby sustaining interest and creating new habits of responsibility towards maintenance.



Water tap constructed by Women's Development Section (UNICEF Programme), Syanja District.



Chhang rice mill, Tanahu District.

Food Processing: a Power-Driven Mill

Eighty-seven per cent of the work involved in necessary food processing in the home is done by women. Like most women in Nepal, the women of Chhang village, Tanahu District, spend many hours, often very early in the morning, processing grains with the jato or dhikki. These traditional methods used in husking rice, wheat, millet or maize not only take a lot of time but also much effort. This problem can be alleviated by the establishment of electric or water-power-driven mills.

Similar to many small settlements in Nepal, Chhang is situated on a ridge, where the water is too far away to be used for powering a mill and no one in the village was prepared to take a loan for a generator and set up in business alone; the risk was too great. Finally, a Committee was formed and the WDO appealed to UNICEF for support. As a result Chhang villagers received the gift of a 5 h.p. generator. A site close to the largest group of houses was chosen and the villagers contributed materials and together built a mill house. The fees to use the mill cover the running costs including the operators' wages; any profit is accumulated to pay for repairs. The rates are reasonable, which enables everyone in the village to use the mill. It has made a significant difference to the lives of the women in the area who are now able to use more productively the time they save in food processing.

202.1-89T0-7826

TABLES 1a, b and c
MEN AND WOMEN'S
CONTRIBUTION TO DIRECTLY AND
INDIRECTLY PRODUCTIVE
ACTIVITIES (*)

TABLE 1a
Input into Household, Farming and
Economic Activities

	Men per cent	Women per cent
Household maintenance	14	86
Family farming enterprise	43	57
Local market economy	62	38
Migration for employment (usually India)	75	25

TABLE 1b
Unpaid Family Labour Input into
Agricultural Operations

	Men per cent	Women per cent
Land preparation	50	50
Terrace upkeep	60	40
Chemical fertiliser	89	11
Organic fertiliser	14	86
Planting	50	50
Weeding	14	86
Irrigation	37	63
Harvesting and post- harvesting operations	40	60
Kitchen gardening	37	63
Seed selection	29	71
Crop protection	100	—
All agricultural activities	38	62

TABLE 1c
Time Input into Social and Domestic
Work

	Men per cent	Women per cent
Cooking and serving	10	90
Cleaning	5	95
Maintenance	7	93
Laundry	10	90
Shopping	54	46
Other domestic	22	78
Child care	16	84
Animal husbandry	55	45
Gathering and hunting	60	40
Fuel collection	34	66
House construction	72	28
Food processing	13	87
Water collection	8	92
Outside earning activity	69	31
Local market economy	43	57
All social and domestic activities	36	64

(*) Source: The Status of Women in Nepal, Kathmandu, 1981

Food Supplies: the First Women's Co-operative in Nepal

The success with their rice mill encouraged Chhang women to tackle another of their problems: the lack of local retail outlets. Most villagers have insufficient irrigated land to grow enough rice and corn for the whole year, which necessitates women to carry the family foodstuffs from the nearest bazaar in Tharpu. Every shopping trip involves about 75 minutes' walk from Chhang while the return journey heavily laden takes two hours uphill.

Chhang women first raised this issue in one of the evening literacy classes organised by the WDO and her staff; they wanted to know if it is possible to buy food in bulk and sell it locally at reasonable prices. The WDO sought advice from the Co-operative Development Department. After further discussions with the villagers it was agreed to set up a retail co-operative which would also operate a loan disbursement scheme.

In collaboration with the Co-operative Development Department, which donated RS. 50,000 (Stg. £1,111), and the Women Service Co-ordination Committee, the WDO formed a local committee of seven members: herself, the Bank Manager, Co-operative Development Officer, the Cottage Industry Representative and three local women. The Co-operative Development Department surveyed the area and those interested in the scheme were helped to complete the necessary forms. Possible income-generating projects were also investigated. As a result it was decided that an agricultural venture based on traditional skills and marketing the goods locally was most feasible. In May 1987 the first 48 Chhang members established the co-operative by each paying Rs. 5 (11p) entrance fee and buying a Rs. 20 (44p) share. The Co-operative Development Department also provided some basic training. Within one and a half years Rs. 12,000 (Stg. £266) were spent buying rice, salt and cooking oil at wholesale prices. The retail price available to co-operative members also includes the cost of hiring porters to carry the food up from the bazaar, thus releasing the women from this tiring chore. Membership has increased to 145 and Rs. 49,000 (Stg. £1088) have been disbursed for loans mainly on a group basis for buffalo and goat raising, sugar cane and ginger production and retail shops. The loan recovery schedule is similar to the commercial banking system and roughly demands repayment for loans of up to:

- Rs. 4000 (Stg. £88) for retail shops within 1½ years
- Rs. 5000 (Stg. £111) for buffaloes within 3 years
- Rs. 3000 (Stg. £66) for goats within 3 years
- Rs. 1000 (Stg. £22) for sugar cane and ginger cultivation within 1 year.

The Co-operative is run as a joint venture. It is managed by the local Committee; the



Co-operative member: buffalo group.

District Veterinary and Agricultural line agencies give technical support; the WDO sustains the interest of its members, co-ordinates the programme and does the daily accounts which are sent monthly to the Co-operative Development Department. Soon, after four months' training, a manager is due to take over the day to day running of this co-operative. This full-time employee can be expected to further increase the number of co-operative members as well as the services rendered them. Chhang women thus now have not only reduced their household labour input but they also have access to credit which enables them to venture into more of their own income-generating activities.

Fuelwood Collection: a Women's Forest

Girls and women fetch from nearby forests about 66 per cent of the fuel consumed per household. The village women of Nareshwar panchayat in Gorkha District have begun to realise that their forests are rapidly receding. In their grandmothers' days fuel collection involved about 30 minutes walk, whereas now a round trip takes several hours. How far will their children have to walk to their forests? Local women discussed this problem with the PCRW staff. Without access to resources it was at first difficult to envisage what could be done. After lengthy discussion the Local Area Committee voted in March 1987 to give the women 5 hectares of rough land on a steep hillside. Ostensibly this land is commonly owned. With continuous encouragement

Co-operative goat-rearing loans.



from the PCRW field staff, Nareshwar women started to clear it. Many more volunteered to help, some just carrying water for those who laboured in the hot sun. The local Forestry Office provided not only 6,000 seedlings of local varieties of fuel and fodder trees but also training on how to plant and care for them. Because free-roaming animals constitute the biggest threat to Nepalese forests by eating all the young shoots, the Forestry Office offered to employ and pay one woman to watch the young forest. Thus in the past year the seedlings planted in Nareshwar have been well looked after.

A Committee was formed consisting of all the women involved, the PCRW field staff and the woman who watches the forest. Its main function in years to come will be to decide who uses the fuel wood and fodder and how it should be cut. Nareshwar women are proud of their achievement, locally it is called the 'Women's Forest'. Women from other areas of the District come to visit the forest and learn how it was created. The project needed little money but relied on the generosity of the local village committee, the co-operation of the local Forestry Office and the work of the PCRW field staff to sustain the women's interest and enthusiasm and further their understanding of the surrounding environment.

Child Care: a Village Centre

Eighty-four per cent of the child care is done by women. This responsibility constrains their productive work, especially outside the home. When collecting fuel, water or fodder many children are left on their own or in the case of their siblings. If accidents happen the woman alone is held responsible. To alleviate this problem UNICEF funded at least one child care centre for every PCRW site. Each such centre has its local management committee composed of village leaders, women's organisation representatives, parents and PCRW field staff. Equipment, staff wages and some nutritious foods are financed from the PCRW annual budget. The centre staff, who look after the children, are always chosen from the local community. They and the PCRW officials who supervise the daily running of these centres are specifically trained for the job in Kathmandu. Children's needs and their parents' interest in the running of the centre



Child care centre, Kavre District.

are the main criteria for the admittance of children. Originally it was hoped that these centres would become self-sufficient through the parents working on communal income-generating projects. The high costs, however, have made this impossible. Ideally these centres could become learning places on health, family planning, etc. Already children's growth is monitored there regularly, so that malnutrition can be detected at an early age. Without exception the child care centres provide a stimulating environment in which children can play safely, and where they become preconditioned to school later in life. Meanwhile the mothers can use their newly gained time to supplement their family income. For example, women in Panchkhal panchayat in Kavre District, only 46 kilometres from Kathmandu, work intensely over a three-month period growing potatoes which yields each of them an



approximate profit of Rupees 1000 (£22). They began by forming credit groups and used the loans to buy potato seeds and fertiliser wholesale. Together they worked: harvesting each other's land, sharing the costs of ploughing and transport to market. Because it was a new venture the WDO insisted on accurate accounts for future reference. Having seen the success of their friends, more women now want organised child care to enable them to plant crops for the Kathmandu market.

Luckily, the capital is nearby and demand there for these crops will not be saturated that easily. More women therefore can improve their families' levels of living by using the facilities provided by the PCRW programme and the link it offers to the commercial banking system.

Committed Field Staff, the Secret of Project Success

The achievements of these small projects within the Women's Development Programme may seem unimportant but their impact should not be underestimated. They have successfully released women to diversify their activities and use their time more productively. They have also encouraged group ventures which represent a new phenomenon in Nepalese society; co-operation outside the family was not part of their traditional culture. The experience of working in groups is giving these women a new sense of achievement, which enhances their self-esteem.

The success of these programmes depends not so much on the amount of aid but more



Poultry rearing: credit group member.

important is the competence and commitment of the field staff and the technical support given by local line agencies. Also essential is the co-operation between different programmes working in the same area to avoid competition and overlap.

The most difficult task facing field workers is to make local people identify themselves with individual development programmes. Without such popular participation their initial interest soon wanes, which jeopardises the programmes' long-term success. To ensure local people's involvement requires lots of patience and perseverance: checking up can be dull and frustrating for field workers. "Why can't people learn and retain information first time round?" they often ask. Walling PCRW site in Syanja District provides a good example of persistent 'follow up', where the WDO understands its importance. She has been working there for five years: 75 per cent of the women can now read and write and they use their knowledge. This contrasts with the overall female literacy rate in Nepal of no more than 18 per cent. The WDO organises monthly meetings of interest groups of all those who have attended literacy classes to read simple leaflets (of which there is a desperate shortage) and discuss different topics on health, sanitation, agriculture, family planning, etc. Here the women can meet, use their literacy and discuss life in general. These small meetings not only offer new opportunities but they also give these women confidence. This is an important pre-condition to make them feel able to participate in community meetings where men are present. Progress often seems unbearably slow. Looking generally at the huge difficulties rural people face every day these projects may seem like mere drops in the ocean.

Yet these developmental efforts at grass roots level help local people to become aware of their own needs, and gain an understanding of what assistance is available and why it might be beneficial. Most important is the fact that they have some control over the change that development programmes can bring to their own communities. Surely these are some of the key issues of any rural development in practice.

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